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DO NOT GO CHEAPLY INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT. Death-Ritual Consumption in Asante, Ghana

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Theory on identity negotiations posits that a person's identity-construction project ceases upon death. We tested this proposition using death-ritual consumption experiences of consumers in Asante, Ghana, West Africa. We found that bereaved Asante consumers engage in conspicuous ritual consumption in pursuit of newer social identities for their deceased and themselves and that funerals involve a reciprocal and continuing relationship between the living and the dead. In addition, we found that terror-management theory is limited in its relevance for non-Western contexts. We also detected limits to the ability to transform global capital into local capital.

In spite of the abundance of evidence in the social science literature suggesting a link between death and consumption (e.g., Baudrillard 1993; Goody 1962; Hertz 1960; Metcalf and Huntington 1991; Turley 1998), references to death in consumer studies are rare. Nevertheless, there is evidence of a recent growing interest in issues around the end of life among consumer researchers (e.g., Gentry et al. 1995; Hirschman 1990; Kates 2001; O'Donohoe and Turley 2000; Price et al. 2000; Schwartz, Jolson, and Lee 1986; Turley 1995). However, all of these studies have been located in the United States or Europe, and none has examined the consumption implications of death rituals specifically. Therefore, we embarked on an inquiry into death-ritual consumption behavior in an African cultural context in an effort to extend consumer research beyond the dominant Western philosophical boundaries of thought. In this article, we explore some of the sociocultural dynamics that facilitate the construction of meaning and identities in Asante, a society in Ghana, West Africa, and examine how consumers manage various aspects of death through consumption.

Our primary objective was to examine the robustness of

examine the seeming ease of conversion of one form of consumption capital to another, for example, from global to local or from economic to cultural (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1997, 1998). We locate these objectives in the sociocultural dynamics of class and status in Asante. In pursuit of these objectives, we also consider the adequacy of terror-management theory (TMT; Becker 1973; Greenberg et al. 1986; Solomon et al. 1998) in explaining death-ritual consumption in this non-Western context. Our study follows in the path of others (e.g., Arnould 1989) who show that existing conceptual frameworks can be challenged and extended based on evidence found in differing cultural contexts.

DEATH, IDENTITY, AND TERROR MANAGEMENT

Death in Western societies is generally perceived as the "material end of the body and the social self" (Seale 1998, p. 34) and denotes "the irreversible loss of the capacity for consciousness" (Gervais 1986, p. 159). Simply put, death means separation—separation from the realities of the world



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the theoretical position that a person's identity-construction project ceases upon death (Giddens 1991; Riley 1983); an observation that has been based primarily on research located in Western cultures. A subordinate objective was to

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and loved ones or objects. This separation causes the bereaved to reflect on the meanings and value of life, and what this means for the bereaved's existence. The bereaved also makes conscious effort to make sense of death in the human experience. These reflections often generate a variety of negative emotions such as anger, fear, guilt, and shame and feelings of self-inadequacy, which may be assuaged by consumption such as the conspicuous mortuary expression of affluence or investment in cryonic suspension (Berger 1967; Brown 1997; Grainger 1998; Parkes 1998). In contemporary Western societies, these efforts may also represent consumers' pursuit of symbolic immortality (Hirschman 1990). According to TMT, these strategies help people manage their

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Abstract:

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